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SUBJECT: Supporting women and artisans in eastern Baghdad

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This is a Baghdad ePRT-2 reporting cable.

¶1. SUMMARY: Baghdad has a vibrant artistic and craft community connected by a network of NGOs, mostly female-run, that help members earn a tenuous livelihood. Baghdad EPRT-2 has undertaken a number of initiatives to assist these NGOs with business and marketing training. With a QRF micro-purchase, the U.S. NGO Aid to Artisans developed an Internet-based course designed to expand the market potential for Iraqi artists and craftspeople, and presented it March 10-11 in a pilot project to leaders of three NGOs. The training will enable these NGOs to mentor the artisans within their organization in skills essential to growing their business and increase their earning potential. The training program received good media coverage in the U.S. including the Hartford Courant newspaper and WNPR's "All Things Considered" radio program. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Iraq's rich heritage of art dates back to pre-Babylonian times and has evolved through time, stressing the importance of the country's strategic location and religious history. In today's Iraq, with high unemployment and especially limited opportunities for widowed and disadvantaged women, many of these individuals are turning to native skills and learned talents to make a living for themselves. Many of these have the ability to create works of art depicting the culture of Iraq, while others are trained in fine sewing and embroidery. In the past few years, with the assistance of NGOs started either through the efforts of concerned Iraqis or through the support of U.S. or international agencies, many of these artisans have come together for training and support.

¶3. Using the QRF program, Baghdad ePRT-2 has helped to fund several initiatives designed to strengthen the network of women's NGOs in the Karada, Rusafa and 9 Nissan districts of eastern Baghdad. Some of these projects provided sewing machines, generators and computers to organizations such as the Iraqi Business Women's Union in Karada (which offers sewing and computer training to women widowed by war and terrorism). These organizations are then able to provide support to their members through mentoring, organized shows, and the occasional contract for piecework sewing.

¶4. Almost all local artisans attempt to sell their works through personal contacts, street vendors and occasional special events, such as an EPRT-2-funded bazaar at the Iraqi Businesswomen's Union held to celebrate International Women's Day March 8. Some of the more "sophisticated" artisans have established relationships with local shops that resell the merchandise. Many of these are family-based relationships, where a brother or father of the artisans will display the works in his shop with the hope of attracting a buyer. But the concept of marketing and effective distribution to a much larger group of potential buyers is unknown to many of the artisans that these NGOs work with. Many of these women have limited education and exposure to modern business concepts. If they could receive the basic business knowledge necessary to profitably price their products and expand their market exposure, more could be employed and life improved for those who

need to support themselves and their families.

15. Recognizing the potential of linking some of these organizations to a larger, international market, EPRT-2 identified the Hartford, Connecticut-based Aid to Artisans (ATA) to assist. ATA is an international nonprofit organization that has assisted artisans in over 110 countries by providing training in business skills and marketing, as well as facilitating distribution relationships with major retail outlets throughout the United States. With QRF funding, ATA adapted its program for Iraq and organized a two-day training class in costing, pricing, marketing and market analysis.

16. On March 10-11, ATA conducted two four-hour training sessions using the conference room facilities at the Baghdad PRT in the International Zone. Six women and two men from three local NGOs attended the training. An ATA "business coach" in Hartford presented several modules addressing: market trends for artistic materials, steps in successful product development, creating effective marketing, using the internet in product promotion, and costing and pricing. The program was conducted using Adobe Connect and hosted through the State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs, whose assistance was invaluable. This being Iraq, there were technical glitches. Limited bandwidth in Baghdad meant that a two-way video feed was not possible, and a power outage on day two killed Internet and telephone linkages for about an hour. Despite these difficulties, the training succeeded because the participants were able to observe the instructor in real-time, see the slide presentation in Arabic (translated by ePRT-2's staff) and address questions directly to the instructor (by telephone). All of the participants said that they found the information appropriate for their work and very beneficial for their students. They all indicated that would use and share these techniques in the future.

17. At the end of the training, two attendees from the Iraqi Business Women's Union remained behind to be interviewed by reporters who had monitored part of the class from Connecticut. The

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Hartford Courant newspaper published a story on March 12 and the story was also covered by WNPR's "All Things Considered" radio program.

18. COMMENT: The ATA training program was an experiment that we think succeeded, despite the difficulties. Proof of the concept will only come, of course, down the road when we can evaluate how well the NGOs have used what they learned to further train their members.

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